

MDAR Continues to Monitor the Spread of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Other States

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Since December of 2014, state and federal regulatory officials have been dealing with the incursion of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza virus (HPAI) in both wild and domestic birds in the US. The earliest reports concerned a small number of ill captive falcons in Washington State and appeared to be limited to the Pacific Flyway. A short time later disease appeared in both the Mississippi and Central Flyways. We are currently dealing with a catastrophic outbreak affecting millions of birds and the US economy as well. Fortunately, the current risk of spread of Avian Influenza to people is considered to be low and no people have become ill at this time.

The normal migratory pathways of wild birds are generally in a north/south or south/north direction. Although we might like to think of these pathways as distinct, they overlap considerably and there is certainly no barrier requiring any migratory bird to “stay in its own lane”. The birds and the pathways respect no national boundaries and are not subject to regulatory controls. The flyway maps also indicate that there are particular areas where the flyways actually seem to merge. And then there is the bird equivalent of socialization in their summer or winter vacation spots, so you can just imagine the potential for disease spread.

Current information gleaned from epidemiology studies is inconclusive as to the exact cause of introduction and spread of the virus into the US commercial poultry industry. Initial introduction to the affected areas appears to have been from wild birds and may have actually occurred last fall. There is concern that people, equipment, and wild birds or rodents may contribute to lateral spread of the disease within a farm location or to other locations owned by the same company. Strict biosecurity procedures are being recommended throughout the industry.

There are currently no isolations of the virus in the Atlantic Flyway. However, given the movement patterns of migratory birds, it is not a matter of “if” but “when”. Pennsylvania and New York have already cancelled poultry exhibitions and swap meets to mitigate risk. Any isolation of HPAI virus in the Atlantic Flyway will likely result in further cancellations of poultry events along the entire East Coast. Predictions are that HPAI will arrive on the East Coast potentially as early as fall 2015 and no later than the fall of 2016.

The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (DAR) is currently working with commercial producers, backyard hobbyists and others to advise them of the disease risk and to encourage preventive measures. Multiple state and federal agencies are reviewing and updating emergency plans to maximize the ability to contain the disease. The agencies are also responding to reports of potential disease such as increased mortality or decreased production.

HPAI generally presents as a respiratory disease in poultry. Coughing, sneezing, swollen or discolored combs and wattles, decreased feed intake, decreased production, and increased mortality in the flock

are all common signs. The disease presentation for the HPAI currently in the Midwest has been primarily dramatic increases in mortality, with few other clinical signs. Reports from producers of “clinical signs” in their flock must be quickly followed up by testing to confirm disease. Laboratory confirmation of the actual disease present is critical for both disease control measures and indemnity payments. Indemnity payments are based on the number of live birds appraised by state or federal officials once disease has been confirmed. Birds lost prior to the diagnosis are not part of the indemnity payment.

State and federal officials are recommending that both producers and hobbyists remain vigilant. Flock owners should do their best to minimize contact between domestic birds and wild birds particularly wild waterfowl. Exhibition birds, new arrivals or any birds that have had contact with other flocks or birds should be isolated prior to commingling with the main flock.

Surveillance efforts for Avian Influenza in domestic flocks in Massachusetts are conducted routinely as part of the National Poultry Improvement Plan. Increased surveillance plans in wild bird populations are expected to be announced shortly. Increased mortality events in domestic flocks or wild birds should be reported immediately to animal health (617-626-1795) or wildlife officials (508-389-6300) respectively to expedite rapid testing and diagnosis.

An Avian Influenza FAQ has been developed by DAR, the Department of Public Health and the Department of Environmental Protection in conjunction with federal and local partners and can be accessed at <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/id/epidemiology/cdc-animals-pet-safety.html>.